

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012

China Beat Archive

8-7-2008

Questioning the Olympic Project: Lessons from Seoul

Sam Goffman

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

Goffman, Sam, "Questioning the Olympic Project: Lessons from Seoul" (2008). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 50.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/50>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Questioning the Olympic Project: Lessons from Seoul

August 7, 2008 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

By Sam Goffman

"You Americans look down on us—you think of us as low-educated and savage. I hope the Olympics can change all that."

One could be forgiven for thinking the above statement is from contemporary China. In fact, the statement is from a South Korean travel agent, who said it on September 16, 1988, one day before the opening ceremonies of the 1988 Summer Olympics, held in Seoul.^[1]

It is striking how many of the expectations regarding what the Olympics will do for China's status in the world reflect earlier expectations in other East Asian countries that have hosted the Games—Japan in 1964 and Korea in 1988—and, to a lesser extent, other "developing" countries, such as Mexico in 1968. The most far-reaching of these is a yearning for international acknowledgement of the country's status as a major economic power, and confirmation from Western countries of China's equal standing as a modern nation-state. This expectation has been covered extensively in foreign media, so much so that it has become almost requisite for stories about the Beijing Olympics to include a line about China's efforts to appear "modern" to the outside world.

As Susan Brownell noted in [a recent essay](#), China's view of modernity tends to be about 100 years out of date—based on an evolutionary model of history, it focuses on economic achievements and leaves out more recent, Western-centered additions to the ideal of modernity, such as human rights. The Olympics, in its role as stage on which modernity is performed, certainly plays an important role in this broad historical arc. However, the Olympics act as more than a mere passive demonstration of historical progress: it can also act as a destabilizing event, forcing us to investigate the meaning of "modernity" itself.

The Olympics reveals itself as a stage on which modernity can be performed when it is hosted by what is widely considered to be a developing country. In the run-up to the 1988 Seoul Games, as in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Games, much foreign reporting mentioned that the Olympics gave Seoul a chance to demonstrate its "progress" to the world. What exactly constituted progress in the context of the Games, however, was hardly set in stone. Infrastructure was an obvious consideration—the charter of the International Olympic Committee requires its members to select a host country that shows a clear ability to supply the necessary infrastructure to support the Games. In practice, however, "progress" in the context of the Olympics has been much more ambiguous than merely the capability of building roads, telecom equipment, stadiums, hotels, and other physical necessities.

For the Korean government, as well as the Chinese, progress had an economic meaning more than any other. For protesters who have labeled the 2008 Games the "Genocide Olympics" or who have demonstrated against Chinese treatment of Tibetans, human rights hold a more prominent position. Journalists from Western countries have generally shown that, when it comes to China, progress means more than skyscrapers and expressways. Similarly, reportage about the 1988 Korean Games mentioned poverty, the conflict between North and South Korea, and historic national wounds in the same breath as accolades for Korea's economic progress.

This essay explores the ways the Olympics can encourage us to think about the meanings of "modernity" itself. Rather than focusing on the 2008 Olympics—which are currently being covered to a huge extent—the essay looks back at the Seoul Olympics. An investigation of this earlier entrance onto the modern world stage of an East Asian country will highlight trends that are once more making an appearance in China.

The 1988 Seoul Olympics: Glitter versus Squalor

As in 2008, foreign media in 1988 generally recognized the importance of the Olympics for Korea's entry into the club of modern nation-states. Brian Bridges, writing in *International Affairs* ahead of the Games, noted that "the Olympics do symbolize for the Koreans the international recognition of their

country's desired transition from the Third to the First World,"[2] and the majority of articles about the Games as a whole—as opposed to articles about specific sporting events—expressed this idea.

When writing about the frenzy and excitement surrounding the 1988 Olympics, most foreign journalists first set the scene by describing the vast preparations taking place in Seoul. The larger context of the Olympics was Korea's meteoric economic rise, and the rapid changes there were indeed remarkable. In 1987, Korea's gross national product increased 12 percent from the previous year. One article expressed admiration of the range of products Korea exported, "from cars to semiconductors," and a work force that puts in 57-hour weeks.[3] Another noted that the government had "spent billions of dollars to create a showcase for visitors drawn here by the 1988 Summer Games, and has touted the international event as a symbol of South Korea's advancement as a modern nation." [4] The apparent anxiety of Korea to seem modern, as noted by these foreign articles, was borne out by the persistent emphasis by Korean officials that their country's status as "modern" was on par with Western countries. As one official on the Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee said, "The world is seeing Korea as an advanced, modern nation." [5]

Korea's effort to put its modernity on display was a recurrent theme in foreign reports on the Seoul Games. The emphasis on the Olympics as performance of modernity in these articles has several effects that resonate with today's coverage of China. First, it immediately marks Korea as an outsider to modernity. Korea had previously been relegated to the realm of the Third World or the Second World; now, it appeared to be rapidly remaking itself into a modern nation-state. The modernity that Korea was attempting to achieve, however, was not homegrown or "natural," but reflected Western-influenced preconceptions of what modernity should look like. Despite Korean pride in these changes, foreign media frequently presented such efforts to replicate the Western experience as superficial and even phony.

Second, the media's emphasis on the Olympics as performance encouraged a questioning attitude regarding what it takes for a nation-state to become "modern." This skepticism about Korea's claims to modernity revealed itself in the foreign press through a focus on human rights, protests, and especially poverty. In the lead-up to the Games, there was considerable controversy over what role North Korea would play (it ultimately boycotted the Games). The South Korean government's handling of the situation led to several protests by South Korean students, which many Koreans feared would harm their image during the Olympics. The government's stance was unwavering: protesters would be sternly dealt with because protests would spoil the atmosphere of the Games and humiliate South Korea in the eyes of the world.[6]

Korean poverty provided the handiest counter-image to the false glitter of the Games, and encouraged several Western news articles to question the modern project as panacea to a nation's ills. Journalists criticized Korea's almost exclusive focus on economic achievement as the core of "progress." In the midst of the Games one reporter traveled to a small Korean town not far from Seoul:

Here in Taejon, signs of the new prosperity also exist. But a visit to this town a little more than an hour south of Seoul also reveals a different picture of the much-touted Korean economic miracle, one in which many people have fallen by the wayside in the march toward progress.[7]

In comparing Seoul's shining symbols of modernity to the squalor of a nearby town, the author challenges a central precondition of modernity: the uncritical acceptance of "progress," here narrowly defined as economic progress, as vital for the success of the nation-state. The author notes the disjointed nature of Korea's modernity, in which poverty can exist alongside wealth and the catchall of "progress" does not include every member of the country. The author also notes the official silencing of conflicting experiences that clash with the overriding narrative of the nation-state's advancement.

The Olympics, which Korea seized as an opportunity to display its modern progress—a "grand spectacle so carefully orchestrated by government authorities,"[8] as another journalist put it—provided the impetus for Western journalists to question the modern project. That they rarely extended this questioning attitude to their own societies, or explored the historical conditions of Korea's acceptance of that project, perhaps indicates some willful disregard on their part in addition to the single-minded intensity of the Olympic spotlight.

Looking forward to Beijing

The performance of the Olympics on the world stage seeks to concentrate the nation-state's achievements onto a relatively localized area; in China, this area is Beijing and several other major cities; in Korea, it was Seoul. Both Korea and China have sought to use the Olympics as a way to situate themselves, by means of these cities, alongside other modern states by putting their progress on display. The Chinese slogan of "One world, one dream" is a fitting précis of this idea.

However, any attempt for a non-Western country—or, more specifically, a country that is widely perceived to have not yet achieved modernity—to enter the club of modern nation-states increases anxiety about whether the country is "ready" to become modern. The Olympics is not merely a screen on which these anxieties can be projected. It serves as a catalyst that forces us to investigate the symbols and values that constitute the very idea of progress. Just as Western reporting about the Seoul Olympics focused on problems in Korea that proved it was not "modern"—human rights, the difficulty of staging protests, problems of poverty—coverage of China has followed a similar path, leading readers away from the Games themselves into a critique of a nation's position in the world. The Olympics, in its role as world stage, invites a public reexamination of what it means to be modern, thus revealing deeply held tensions in the term, and bringing to the surface its intrinsic ambiguity.

Sam Goffman received a Master's degree in East Asian Studies from Duke University and works for Interfax-China, an economic news service.

[1] *New York Times*. September 16, 1988.

[2] Bridges, Brian. "East Asia in transition: South Korea in the limelight." *International Affairs*. Vol. 64, No. 3. (Summer, 1988), pp. 381-392. P. 382.

[3] *New York Times*. September 29, 1988.

[4] "Beyond the glitter, some Koreans strive to survive." Jon Funabiki. 25 September 1988. *The San Diego Union-Tribune*.

[5] "Korean Official: TV, Not Tourists, Counts." Associated Press. 24 September 1988. *The San Francisco Chronicle*.

[6] *New York Times*. August 16, 1988; August 17, 1988.

[7] "Beyond the glitter, some Koreans strive to survive." Jon Funabiki. 25 September 1988. *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. 1,2, A-1.

[8] "South Korea and the Games – on eve of Olympics, survival is more a concern for poor." Lewis M. Simons. *The Seattle Times*. 16 September 1988.

Tags: [The 2008 Beijing Olympics](#)